

# Amis Wood Carving and the Kakita'an Panels

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Using mostly natural materials, the Amis create visual images that express their beliefs and emotions and document their history and lives. Their rich visual culture can be seen in traditional handicrafts such as weaving, pottery, and wood carving. The angular and rugged images, imbued with force and passion and filled with totems and symbols, clearly mark the visual identity of the Amis.

The Amis prefer wood carving for complex story-telling. Using driftwood, wooden pillars, or planks, they create images in low and medium bas-relief. Traditionally these wood carvings decorated houses, for instance on interior pillars or the space above the entrance. Wood carvings also marked important public locations such as a gate or a bridge. Their most important role, however, is to serve as the focus in a spiritual encounter or a ritual performance.

The Amis practice shamanism in their traditional religion. Women shamans communicate with deceased ancestors on behalf of the living descendants by way of spiritual possession, which is often initiated with images on wood carvings. Portraits of past tribal leaders, joined with important historical events and the Amis origin stories, are rendered in lively carved images that allow the Amis to visualize the unseen world of the dead and to generate a shared historical memory. The most important examples of such wood carvings are the wooden panels from the Kakita'an ancestral shrine in the Tafalong settlement, the oldest and largest Amis settlement in eastern Taiwan.

Three themes are commonly depicted in Amis wood carving. The first and perhaps the most common theme consists of symbolic and totemic motifs, such as the sun, which symbolizes motherhood in Amis culture. Traditional Amis society was matrilineal; images of the sun appeared often in wood carving to express adoration of mothers and reverence towards motherly authority. As a companion to the sun, the moon also was depicted to symbolize fatherhood. Another common motif was the white crab, the totem of the Tafalong settlement. According to local legend, there used to be a plentitude of white crabs in the area. Since crabs can live on land and in water, they were considered an ideal symbol for the Tafalong Amis, who were skilled both in hunting and fishing.

The second common wood carving theme portrays the origin and legends of the Amis. Like many Pacific aboriginal tribes, the Amis have a flood legend. The Amis believed that they were descendants of a brother-and-sister couple who escaped a great flood that destroyed their homeland. On a wooden mortar, the couple washed ashore at eastern Taiwan and subsequently began the Amis tribe. This origin story is depicted on one of the ten panels originally erected in the Kakita'an ancestral shrine.

Another legend depicted on the Kakita'an panels accounts for the head hunting ritual. In this story, two brothers beheaded a stranger who offended them by muddying the river water. They were shocked to discover that the stranger was in fact their father. The older brother, Mayao, who cut off the father's head, later buried himself in repentance. On the Kakita'an panel

a standing figure of Mayao just before he sinks into the ground is depicted in a weighty and somber carving, vividly portraying a man in anguish.

Along with these myths and legends, portraits of historical tribal leaders who made contributions to the establishment and prosperity of the tribe are also represented on the Kakita'an panels. The juxtaposition of tribal leaders and mythical stories joins the Amis historical past with its legendary past in a continuous narrative, which is essential for forging the Amis cultural identity.

The third theme in Amis wood carving is about everyday experience. Mundane and joyful moments, such as pounding millet, dancing, and courting, are depicted with lively details. These images offer information about the customs and material culture in traditional Amis society and a way of life that is rapidly disappearing.

Amis tribal leaders have worked with non-native social groups to revitalize and preserve traditional Amis culture. In one such collaboration, children of the Tafalong Elementary School are given lessons on wood carving, a traditional skill that had nearly vanished. The results are encouraging and inspiring. Through learning the history and symbolism of traditional Amis wood carving, the young Amis reacquaint themselves with their traditions, experience the artistic and cultural journey of their ancestors, and bring new meanings and prospects to their culture.